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AUTHOR	Adams, S. Angela
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ABSTRACT

Through an imaginary dialogue with her grandmother, a first-grade teacher reflects on the educational methods which her grandmother used and referred to in her journals and discusses the whole language methods used in schools today. A whole language classroom is described as a busy place where activity abounds and conversations buzz. Whole language is a philosophy that the teacher believes in and an encompassing theory blending the use of all language modes. The focus in whole language is on the process not the product, on meaning and purpose. Whole language teachers are empowered through ownership of their teaching. Many of the experiences described in the classrooms of the 1920s seem similar to what might occur in whole language classrooms today, suggesting that effective educational methods will continue to work over long periods of time. (MG)

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S. Angela Adams

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Grandma's Gift

by

S. Angela Adams
First Grade Teacher
Albuquerque Public Schools
Albuquerque, NM

This summer I began searching for whom or what led me into a career in education. My father was a teacher. Later my mother went back to school, earned a degree, and began teaching about the time I left home. My grandmother had been a teacher for as long as I could remember. Her daily activities and her basic philosophy of life had endeared her to me. She was someone whom I respected and admired. Grandma passed away a few years ago, but still I think of her often.

Grandma was the teacher every student wanted. Her students frequently came to visit her bringing their boyfriends or girlfriends, then husbands or wives, and finally children. Her classroom and home were like museums. She collected everything. Today in my classroom are her doll collection, her beautiful seashell treasury, and 10,000 assorted buttons that she had amassed. I think she would be happy to know there are still children enjoying her treasures today.

The letters that follow are imaginary; they are responses I wrote in 1989 to observations that my grandmother recorded in the journal she kept while attending Illinois State Normal University in 1924, and rejoinders I imagined she might have made. It is through her written record that I am able to create a dialogue and travel back in time to experience a taste of schooling in 1924. Her past work illuminates my present work in teaching.

Dear Grandma,

I wanted to write and ask you about a new trend in education called "whole language." Have you ever heard about it? What do you think? You taught for thirty-odd years, and surely you saw it all. What really works with students? What techniques did you find effective? Your life was dedicated to teaching. Teaching was blessed to have you for so many years. What were your secrets for effective teaching?

Love,
Angie

Dear Angie,

It's been a long time since I began teaching. I attended Illinois State Normal University for two years, 1924-1925, before I began teaching. After teaching for some time I went back to Illinois State University, attending during the summers, and graduated in 1953.

What is this "whole language" you talk about? I have not heard those terms before; write again and tell me more about it.

Yes, fads came and went. We spent thousands of dollars on some new-fangled kit, equipment, or book that was going to solve all our problems. Oftentimes we used them for a few years and then relegated the material to a storage room. That which is effective will come back. We may drop a tried and true method for something shiny and new, but good methods will endure. I'll be waiting to hear from you.

Love,
Grandma

Dear Grandma,

I've been thinking about how I could describe a "whole language" classroom to you. Walking into a whole language classroom you immediately will feel something is different. You hear a busy hum as students are actively engaged in learning. The teacher may be difficult to locate.

She may be having an individual conference, working with a small group, or helping a child locate information or materials for a project. The tables or desks may be scattered around the room in various groupings. The teacher's desk may be hidden among bookshelves or learning centers. In fact, it may be turned into a learning center with students sitting and working by it. There are books everywhere, poetry on charts all over the room, big books on the floor, and children busy making their own books. Being a whole language teacher is more than just providing this type of environment. It is not a method, rather a philosophy the teacher believes in.

Whole language is an encompassing theory blending the use of all language modes (speaking, reading, writing, listening). Whole language classrooms are busy places, where activity abounds and conversations buzz. The focus is on the process not the product, on meaning and purpose. Good books are read aloud to and by children. Reading and writing are integrated. Students may learn to read by writing. Good literature surrounds the students and permeates their activities. Children are encouraged to be risk takers, to make choices, to have a say in their learning. Information is presented as part of a whole rather than being taught in isolation. Whole language teachers do not rely on textbooks and tests solely to prescribe their students' materials. Whole language teachers are empowered through ownership of their teaching. Have you ever come across anything like this?

Love,
Angie

Dear Angie,

Thank you for describing what a whole language classroom might be like. I think I would have liked to be in one myself. As I read through my journal I did not find any mention of whole language, but let me tell you about a few activities I found that sound familiar. These are from morning lesson, June 23, 1924:

Ask a child to count how many pupils are here today and write the number on the board. Put a rhyme the children learned last week on the board "Jack Be Nimble." Individual pupils called on to read it. Whole class read it aloud.

Have children point out each line, then all the "Jacks." Put a line under the "Jacks," under the "nimble," "quick" and so on.

Teacher holds cards with phrases and has students compare with the script on board. Play "Guess Game" having one child hide eyes, someone points to a phrase. Then he tries to guess what phrase was selected.

Introduce new poem "The Black Hen" and develop in same way as "Jack Be Nimble."

As I continued reading from the daily plans, I saw that new poetry was introduced daily to teach reading, beginning sounds, and rhyme. Games were played daily, especially for reinforcing skills in math, reading, and spelling. A lot of time was concerned with scripting; children worked for perfect penmanship. Music was a part of each day also. The children learned new songs through echoing. They learned to recognize tunes and practiced toward good tone quality.

I looked for any mention of whole language and the closest I came was this excerpt:

Teacher Purpose: To teach reading by position and comparison. To get the children to read the story as a whole, then to recognize individual lines and phrases, then to learn to recognize and remember individual lines.

I have enjoyed reading my journal and perusing my plan books again. Teaching was fun! There was always something different going on. I hope that you will relish this time with young learners as I did.

Love,
Grandma

Dear Grandma,

Your letter was a big help. Your classroom activities seem similar to those that might occur in a whole language classroom. It's hard to believe children in classrooms over 65 years ago were learning by methods that have recently come back into vogue.

I have been using poetry in my classroom, especially at the beginning of the year, to help children feel successful with reading. Children come to school believing they can read. If we can give them something that is familiar to them or has meaning we have a good chance of helping them succeed. My students frequently write and publish stories based on their own experiences. A favorite of the students is to make a pattern book based on a story they have heard. This usually gets even the most reluctant writer going.

Please write and tell me more about what teaching was like. What were the trends in writing and phonics? What did you have students do while you worked with small groups?

Love,
Angie

Dear Angie,

I frequently had children in my classroom from four or more grade levels when I first began teaching. The notes I have been referring to are all from the 1920s. They should give you an image of schooling back then. Music was important. Songs were used in teaching spelling, math, reading, and penmanship. I found this excerpt concerning penmanship:

We must start writing in the first grade on account of social pressure, although it would perhaps be better to wait until the pupils' smaller muscles were developed.

But if the teacher doesn't teach writing, pupils will invariably be taught at home, usually with a little stub pencil which of course necessitates a pinched finger movement.

Now the best method in teaching writing is to use the whole arm movement in the first two grades. This movement should be taught first through blackboard use.

Whole arm movement and visualization are two main factors in teaching beginning writing. Writing should always have meaning. You have defeated your purpose unless they understand what they are writing about. Any drill game in writing should be continuous, have rhythm and allow freedom.

Pupils also wrote experience stories after visiting museums, farms, stores, gardens, etc. They also rewrote stories from memory such as "The Three Bears," or "The Three Billy Goats."

Phonics was a controversial topic when I began teaching. There were those who were absolutely sure it was the best approach for teaching reading and an equal following who had other preferences. I found these notes from a lecture I attended at the university, July 1924:

Do not use straight phonetic method as many of our words are not made up phonetically. If phonics is to be of any value it must contribute to our present aim in reading. Phonics may help by: 1) analytic (get it by analysis), 2) synthetic (build up new units). If approached analytically phonics should begin with the larger unit.

The issue of phonics wasn't resolved during my tenure. I wonder if it has been yet?

I worked with many groups during each day, especially when I had three or four grade levels, so it was necessary for the children to be occupied with worthwhile activities while I worked with others. There were two types of work: Occupational and busy seat work.

Occupational work should be work that requires judgment, reflection, thinking, play of

imagination, omit individualism and originality. Busy seat-work should be related to reading, numbers, phonics, or seasonal activities. These frequently were drills, review work and practices.

Our days were always full and usually challenging. I am sure children today have daily experiences similar to those my children had in 1924. The most important advice I can give you from one educator to another is to read. Read professionally, read for pleasure, read to learn about new interests you have. Attend lectures, workshops, and other group activities. You must always be a learner, too. In this way education may stay exciting for you also.

Love,
Grandma

REFLECTIONS

Reading through her journal and reflecting on my grandmother's life gave me a sense of how my teaching and life philosophies have developed. This past year I have looked into whole language by attending workshops and reading articles and books. I was surprised to find so many similarities in her notes. Her approach to teaching reading began with the whole selection then focused on phrases and finally on individual words. Many of the activities she used are ones that I use today. Her method of using games and songs to reinforce concepts is one from which I will borrow. I am fortunate not only in having Grandma's experiences from which to learn, but, as an educator today, I have available an expanded knowledge base upon which to draw. Many studies have since been conducted on the acquisition of language, the development of the brain, and the development of writing. Her work, and the work of countless other teachers, has helped us to ask better questions about how children learn to read and write. I believe I have a heightened awareness of the need for children's learning to be meaningful and child-centered. Learning moves from whole to part, but it is more than just this. Our work today is more powerful having grown from the past.

Do good ideas (methods, philosophies, techniques) endure or is everything on a continual cycle which will recur again, both the successes and the failures? I'm leaning toward thinking that good ideas do endure, that even though we give them up for a while they will be back because they work.

Some aspects of what is now called whole language worked before; they can work even better now because of our expanded knowledge. We can't let whole language fall into the trap that so many educational innovations do. A sense of history will help us ground our work so that it is not a mere fad. My grandmother was a great inspiration to me; I don't think I realized it entirely until I read through her journal and spent time reflecting on her life. I, too, am a life-long learner, eager for new experiences. Grandma's greatest gift to me was her thirst for knowledge.

Angela Adams was born and raised in Central Illinois and graduated with a B.S. in Education from Illinois State University, Normal, IL. She received a Master of Arts in Education from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM. She teaches first grade for the Albuquerque Public Schools.

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